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Budget meets demands of a growing state

By Jennifer "JJ" Davis

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Each year for the past seven years, Governor Ruth Ann Minner and the General Assembly have enacted fiscally prudent operating and capital budgets that include critical funding in key areas that all Delawareans rely on: our schools, our economy, our environment, our health, and our state's infrastructure system.

Constructing the FY 2008 budgets posed many challenges to our elected officials. These challenges included our state's growing population and its increased demands on state services, federal budget cuts and the significant shortfall in the state's Transportation Trust Fund.

Despite these challenges, the end result of months of work was a General Fund Budget of \$3.3 billion, an approximate 5.9 percent increase over last year; a \$539.5 million Capital Budget and a \$47.7 million Grant in Aid Budget.

Both our FY 2008 capital and operating budgets represent significant funding accomplishments for our state. These accomplishments could not have occurred without the hard work and foresight of many individuals, including, of course, the Governor and the General Assembly.

Let me share some of these funding highlights for the FY 2008 budgets.

With the overarching belief that every Delaware student deserves the best education possible, we were able to achieve much this year in the area of education. For our youngest Delaware students, we know that having access to

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quality education in the critical early years is vital, as studies have proven that extra time in the classroom can reap a lifetime of benefits. Parents of Delaware kindergarten students can now opt for full-day classes for their children as the result of \$1.9 million that will be used to continue to fully implement the full-day kindergarten program.

Through Governor Minner's vision to allow every Delaware student the chance to attend college, the Student Excellence Equals Degree (SEED) scholarship fund received an additional \$1 million in the FY 2008 budget. The Delaware SEED scholarship program provides tuition for full-time students enrolled in an associate's degree program at Delaware Technical & Community College or the Associate of Arts program at the University of Delaware. Hundreds of Delaware high school graduates have already been able to pursue their dream of going to college and getting their degree because of this innovative program.

Mirroring the already successful reading specialist initiative, Governor Minner's plan to place a math specialist in every middle school in the state will also be fully implemented as a result of an additional \$700,000 in the FY 2008 budget.

Ensuring a strong transportation infrastructure is critical to both our economic development and quality of life in Delaware. The capital budget includes \$256 million to continue funding to maintain our existing infrastructure and move forward on several critical projects. The projected Transportation Trust Fund shortfall was successfully addressed through a comprehensive strategy to focus on the core business of DelDOT, maximize federal funding and refine the project delivery plan. In addition, revenue enhancements in the areas of vehicle registration fees, vehicle documentation fees, a surcharge on traffic fines, and toll increases were enacted to provide additional critical revenue dedicated to the Transportation Trust Fund. These new revenues will allow many projects and services that have been planned for years to move forward.

Better health for all Delawareans continues to be a cornerstone of the Governor's Administration and fighting cancer remains a central focus of this effort. Our FY 2008 budget includes \$16.2 million to continue funding recommendations of the Delaware Advisory Council on Cancer Incidence and Mortality.

Also in the area of health care, we will continue efforts to address infant mortality with the addition of \$1.9 million. And, we will add \$1 million to expand the Delaware Healthy Children Program, more commonly known as CHIP.

Economic development and spurring job growth is essential in keeping our state's economy prosperous for years to come. In the area of economic development, \$5 million is dedicated to fund the fourth year of the Governor's New Economy Initiative. These funds will foster knowledge-based, fast-growing small businesses in technology fields such as biotechnology, advanced materials, clean energy, information technology, and new chemical applications.

Preserving the state's environment now and for future generations is essential to maintain Delaware's outstanding quality of life. Several budget items address this important issue in the FY 2008 budget, including a new \$1 million initiative to preserve forestland, in addition to the continued earmarking of \$10 million per year for farmland preservation and \$10 million per year for open space acquisitions.

Despite the many economic challenges we faced this year, the FY 2008 budget is fiscally responsible and will provide the necessary critical state services that our residents greatly rely and depend on.

We will continue to work together to ensure future budgets remain prudent and reflect the critical needs of our state's residents.

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